DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 287 CS 510 935

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TITLE	"The War of the Worlds". [Lesson Plan].
INSTITUTION	Discovery Communications, Inc., Bethesda, MD.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	12p.; Audio and video clips included in the web site version of this lesson plan are not available from ERIC.
AVAILABLE FROM	DiscoverySchool.com, Customer Service, P.O. Box 6027, Florence, KY 41022-6448. Tel: 877-889-9950 (Toll Free). For full text: http://school.discovery.com/ teachers/.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Activities; English Instruction; Language Arts; Lesson Plans; Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; *Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Role; *Novels; *Radio; Secondary Education; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

Based on H.G. Wells' novel "War of the Worlds" and the reaction to Orson Wells' 1938 adaptation for radio, this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that literature originally created in one medium is often adapted to another medium; and that technology can make the unreal seam real and can otherwise confuse consumers. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

The War of the Worlds

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Dawn L. Moulen, humanities teacher, Woodbridge High School, Woodbridge, Virginia; Kirsten Rooks, English and science teacher, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Literature originally created in one medium is often adapted to another medium.

2. Technology can make the unreal seem real and can otherwise confuse consumers.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

The novel *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, or excerpts

Optional: videotape of 1975 television movie *The Night That Panicked America*

PROCEDURE:

1. This project exposes your students to the concept of literature based on literature based on literature. After your students have read either the complete H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds* or enough to be conversant with it, play for them Orson Welles's 1938 radio broadcast of his adaptation of the novel. You can find an audio copy at waxfiles.

2. Lead a discussion in which your students evaluate Welles's version of Wells's work according to standard criteria for literature. You can begin with the following questions:

- Did the radio play hold your attention?
- Which techniques were effective in giving the play verisimilitude?
- Was the outcome satisfying?
- Did you care what happened to any of the characters?

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3. Regardless of your students' reactions to the radio drama, assign at least a few students to search through printed sources (newspapers, magazines) that were published after Welles's broadcast (which was on Halloween 1938) and that tell the effect the program had on listeners who tuned in late. Have the researchers report their findings to the class.

4. Apply what students have learned about the confusion caused by the radio broadcast to a discussion of how consumers respond to all the media around them today. Was the (unintended?) duping of the American public by Welles's Halloween broadcast something that could have happened only in the 1930s? Have Americans become more sophisticated in their consumption of media? Has anyone in the class heard about misinformation that has been passed on via the Internet as if it were correct information?

5. From the Welles radio script, move on to tell students about the 1975 made-for-television movie *The Night That Panicked America.* This is the story of Welles's radio version; the movie dramatizes the panic caused among listeners who thought an invasion from another planet was actually taking place in New Jersey the night of the broadcast. The movie is not commercially available but occasionally appears on television, so you may have a chance to tape it yourself for your class.

Ask students to suggest why they or anyone else who knows about the Welles-induced-but-unfounded panic would watch *The Night That Panicked America.* That is, if a person knows how a movie ends, what is the reason for watching it anyway?

6. If you want to take the *War of the Worlds* chain one link further, ask students to track down reviews of the 1975 film after it appeared on television.

7. Conclude this study of multiple media by asking students to state in a sentence or two what they learned along the way.

ADAPTATIONS:

It may be more expedient for you to read aloud passages from the Wells novel to students than have them read on their own.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why would H.G. Wells never give a name to his hero/protagonist in *The War of the Worlds*? What is the significance of his anonymity?

2. Wells attended the Normal School of Science where he became a biologist. His prime passions, however, remained reading and writing. What effect did this combination of interests have on H.G. Wells' style as a writer?

3. The character of the curate represents organized religion in *The War of the Worlds*. What is H.G. Wells saying about the role of organized religion in dealing with the Martians and metaphorically, with the real world's political and social problems? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment?

4. Criticize or defend H.G. Wells' conclusion to the Martians' invasion. Was the Martians' defeat appropriate or should the novel have ended differently? What does the ending say about the control humans have over life?

5. In Well's novel, after the Martians have died, the protagonist reflects upon how similar the Martian's attack was to the destruction that people have wrought upon one another. Discuss some examples from history in which one group of people has attempted to destroy another group of people. What, if anything, could be done to try to prevent such acts from happening in the future?

6. H.G. Wells has been accused by some critics as advocating social engineering, an idea whereby society attempts to hasten the rise of the strong and the demise of the weak. In *The War of the Worlds*, do you think that Wells was agreeing or disagreeing with this idea?

EVALUATION:

You can evaluate students' participation in this project by noting students' willingness to contribute to the class discussion, attention during the radio performance, success in locating research materials, and clearly articulated statements about what they've learned.

EXTENSION:

Wells's Influence on Science Fiction
After exposing students to excerpts from Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, ask them to recall elements or scenes from contemporary science fiction books, movies, or television programs that are similar to what they've come across in the 1898 novel. Make the point that writers both influence future generations and often reach to the past for their own inspiration.

Drawing on Scenes from the Book
Have each student select a different scene from H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. After students have read Wells's description, have them draw, paint, or otherwise produce a picture capturing as many details of the description as possible. When the pictures are complete, have students take turns displaying their pictures while the rest of the class tries to determine the characters, location, and actions in the pictured scene.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

The History of Mr. Wells
Michael Foot. Counterpoint, 1995.
Did you know that this British writer, social critic, and futurist predicted the atomic bomb and space flight? Read this biography written by a personal friend of H.G. Wells and learn about Wells's politics and life, and the history of the time.

The Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe
George Ochoa and Jeffrey Osier. Writers Digest Books, 1993.
Have you ever thought about writing science fiction? You will need to imagine things that might happen in the future, based on the knowledge that you have today. This is a handbook for future writers of science fiction.

WEB LINKS:

War of the Worlds by Project Gutenberg
A public domain copy of the e-text of *War of the Worlds* is available for downloading.
http://promo.net/pg/_titles/W.html

H.G. Wells Study Guide
A complete study guide plus Real Audio of the original broadcast.
http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/warofworlds.html

Is Anybody Out There?
A wonderful lesson plan to capture the interest of students in extraterrestrial discussions. The plan requires reading, discussion, small group work, and creative writing.
http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/980929tuesday.html

The Martian Chronicles
Find out about the real Mars with links to NASA, a comparison of Mars and Earth, and more.
http://mchronicles.cosmic.org

War of the Worlds
Do you have students with comprehension problems? The article on *War of the Worlds* here is easy reading with an online comprehension quiz for students to do.
http://www.clta.on.ca/usawaroworld.htm

VOCABULARY:

apex
The uppermost point.
Context:
Wells believed that human beings in the 1890s were at the apex of their rule over the world and would be overthrown by another species.

genre
A category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.
Context:
Wells and other writers of the science fiction genre inspired several generations to look toward the stars.

evolution
A process of change in a certain direction. Also, a theory that the various types of animals and plants have their origin in other preexisting types.
Context:
The Martians may have been a representation of man's evolution, of what man would become.

microorganisms
Microscopic living things, such as bacteria.
Context:
No microorganisms existed in the atmosphere of Mars; therefore, the Martians had not developed immunities to them.

putrefaction
Decomposition of organic matter.
Context:
The Martians died as a result of the bacteria to which they were exposed on Earth, and the resultant putrefaction.

socialist
A person who advocates collective or governmental ownership of property.
Context:
Wells was a socialist, yet not a socialist; he hated the privileged, yet enjoyed hobnobbing with the rich. He was from the lowest of the middle class and feared slipping down to the working class.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: literature

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmark: Demonstrates an understanding of why certain literary works may be considered classics or works of enduring quality and substance.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: science

Standard: Understands the nature of scientific knowledge.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark 1: Knows ways in which science distinguishes itself from other ways of knowing and from other bodies of knowledge.

Benchmark 2: Understands how scientific knowledge changes and accumulates over time (e.g., scientific knowledge is subject to change as new evidence becomes available; some scientific ideas are incomplete and opportunity exists in these areas for new advances; theories are tested, revised, and occasionally discarded).

Benchmark 3: Knows that from time to time major shifts occur in the scientific view of how the world works, but usually the changes that take place in the body of scientific knowledge are small modifications of prior knowledge.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: literature

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark 1: Applies reading skills and strategies to a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature).

Benchmark 2: Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of literary forms and genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature, the Bible).

Benchmark 3: Identifies the simple and complex actions (e.g., internal/external conflicts) between main and subordinate characters in texts containing complex character structures.

Benchmark 4: Makes connections among literary works based on theme (e.g., universal themes in literature of different cultures, major themes in American literature).

Benchmark 5: Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: literature

Standard: Demonstrates competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning.

Benchmark: Understands influences on language use (e.g., political beliefs, positions of social power, culture).

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
First published in 1898, "War of the Worlds" established science fiction as serious literature. But as you'll hear from biographers and critics, H.G. Wells wanted more than just to scare his readers—he thought science could save the world.

View Video Clip ⓟ | View Lesson Plan ⓟ

Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ⓟ

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
The War of the Worlds

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. On what knowledge did Wells base his stories?

2. What warning was H.G. Wells trying to give via *The War of the Worlds*?

3. For which real-life conflict in the end of the 19th century could *The War of the Worlds* be a metaphor?

4. How did H.G. Wells tap into people's unease with Darwin's new scientific theory of evolution?

5. What defeats the Martians in *The War of the Worlds*?

6. What effect did Orson Welles' radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* have on many people who listened to it on Halloween night, 1938.

7. H.G. Wells produced an enormous volume of work in his lifetime. How many works did he produce?

8. What document did H.G. Wells write that later became part of a United Nations charter?

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The War of the Worlds

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. On what knowledge did Wells base his stories?
H.G. Wells based his stories on what science knew, or thought it knew, at the time. He then added his visions about what science would lead to in the future.

2. What warning was H.G. Wells trying to give via *The War of the Worlds*?
H.G. Wells feared a kind of Golden Rule operating in nature. He warned that we might suffer the same fate to which we had consigned other species—extinction.

3. For which real-life conflict in the end of the 19th century could *The War of the Worlds* be a metaphor?
The War of the Worlds could be a metaphor for the threat of imperialistic Germany.

4. How did H.G. Wells tap into people's unease with Darwin's new scientific theory of evolution?
H.G. Wells tapped into people's unease with Darwin's new theory of evolution because his Martians were evolution's product. They had evolved from creatures much like us. Therefore, we might someday become like the Martians.

5. What defeats the Martians in *The War of the Worlds*?
Bacteria finally defeat the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* because their immune systems have no resistance to the microorganism.

6. What effect did Orson Welles' radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* have on many people who listened to it on Halloween night, 1938.
Many people who listened to Orson Welles's radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* on Halloween 1938 did not know it was fiction. The broadcast caused widespread panic.

7. H.G. Wells produced an enormous volume of work in his lifetime. How many works did he produce?
H.G. Wells produced 156 books of fiction, philosophical essays, and political tracts. He also wrote countless articles. He wrote more words than William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens combined.

8. What document did H.G. Wells write that later became part of a United Nations charter?
H.G. Wells wrote a paper called The Universal Rights of Man that the United Nations later adopted as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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